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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SINGAPORE 000460

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS - M. COPPOLA  
NEW DELHI FOR J. EHRENDREICH

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SUBJECT: CULTURE WAR ROILS SINGAPORE'S FEEBLE CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: 07 SINGAPORE 2254

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Daniel Shields for reason 1.4(d)

**¶11. (C) Summary:** The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), a Singapore women's rights organization, suffered a wrenching leadership fight from March 28 through May 2. Though relatively trivial in itself, the episode offers a window on some developing dynamics in Singapore society and politics. A long-entrenched group of liberal, secular insiders lost control of the organization to religious-conservative newcomers, a potential indicator of a growing conservative Christian influence that some Embassy contacts have identified. Instead of accepting the result, the old guard forced an extraordinary general meeting and brought superior numbers to bear to recapture their positions. This tempest in a teapot dominated the mainstream press for days and devolved into accusations that AWARE had been promoting homosexuality in Singapore's public schools, reviving bitter feelings from a 2007 debate over whether to decriminalize sex between men. When a conservative pastor openly took sides from the pulpit, the religious establishment rebuked him, and the government finally stepped in to remind all participants not to mix religion and politics. Though the liberal faction regained control of AWARE, the government suspended use of the AWARE-designed sex education program that had triggered the fight and reaffirmed its informal policy of limited tolerance of homosexuality.  
End Summary.

Civil Society Insiders Fight for Control of Women's Group

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**¶12. (U)** A prominent nongovernmental organization's recent leadership struggle demonstrated how "liberal versus conservative" conflicts play out in nominally apolitical Singapore and highlighted the institutional weakness of civil society in the city-state. The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) has been the most prominent Singapore advocacy group focused on women's issues since its 1985 founding. The organization submits shadow reports to the United Nations on Singapore's implementation of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It also engages in research and public education on women's issues and advocates for women's rights. For years, a relatively small group of insiders controlled AWARE, rotating in and out of its various leadership positions. Membership dwindled from a high of nearly 700 in 1998 to about 250 in 2008.

**¶13. (U)** In early 2009, an influx of new members began, and over 100 people attended AWARE's March 28 annual general meeting to elect new leadership. Organizers had expected only 30 to 40 attendees, based on previous experience. New

members defeated "old guard" candidates to win nine out of 12 seats on the executive committee (exco). The new guard removed all old-guard heads of subcommittees, including well-known activist Braema Mathi as long-standing head of the CEDAW subcommittee, and excited suspicion by refusing to communicate its intentions to AWARE members or the press. The old guard counterattacked on April 14, calling for an extraordinary general meeting to move a vote of no confidence in the new leaders. Both the old and new factions mounted on-line campaigns to swell their ranks. By the time of the May 2 extraordinary general meeting, AWARE had over 3000 members. Nearly all of them - an unprecedented turnout for a civil society event in Singapore - attended the raucous seven-hour meeting, which culminated with members voting by a two-to-one margin to recall the new exco, and the old leaders resuming control.

#### Struggle Pits Religious Conservatives vs. Secular Liberals

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**¶4.** (U) During the new guard's brief term of office, media scrutiny focused on their religious affiliations and social conservatism. Six of the new members, including president Josie Lau, attended the same Anglican church, the Church of Our Saviour (COOS). COOS and its senior pastor, Derek Hong, are known for their outspoken denunciation of homosexuality as a sin. Lau, a vice president at DBS Bank, and the other new exco members received encouragement to join AWARE and run for leadership positions from prominent lawyer Thio Su Mien, another COOS congregant who characterized herself as their "feminist mentor." In an unusual move, DBS publicly chastised Lau for taking on an AWARE leadership role without

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its permission. DBS Bank had become embroiled in public controversy last year after choosing the local branch of the U.S. evangelical (and anti-homosexuality) group Focus on the Family for a charity sponsorship at the behest of Lau's division.

#### Clashing Over Homosexuality Dominates Debate

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**¶5.** (U) AWARE's stance on homosexuality rapidly became the central issue in the fight for control of the organization. The new guard contended that AWARE had strayed from its core mission of promoting women's equality to become an apologist for homosexuality. In particular, the new guard complained about an AWARE-designed sex education program used in some public schools, which they claimed presented homosexuality as a normal alternative lifestyle. The old guard rejoined that the Ministry of Education (MOE) had approved the program for use in schools and that no parents had complained about it. MOE at first publicly supported the old guard's position, but parental complaints soon began to roll in as intensive media coverage continued. MOE then suddenly reversed course, announcing that AWARE had exceeded government guidelines for sex education programs, and suspended the AWARE program pending further review.

#### The Establishment: Keep Religion and Politics Separate

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**¶6.** (U) COOS pastor Derek Hong tested, and quickly found, the limits of official tolerance of religious advocacy by inserting himself into the AWARE leadership fight. In sermons from his pulpit and by emails from the church, he urged concerned Singaporeans to become members of AWARE to support the new exco. Hong's open involvement brought a swift rebuke from the National Council of Churches of Singapore, which issued a statement April 30 condemning church involvement in the affairs of a secular civil society organization. Public statements by the heads of Buddhist, Taoist, and Muslim organizations reinforced the same message. On May 14, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Minister for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng pronounced Singapore's official

response to this aspect of the affair: "Keeping religion and politics separate is a key rule of political engagement."

¶7. (C) Some observers had called for earlier government intervention to calm the heated oratory and unusually febrile press coverage. It may be significant that there were well-connected individuals on both sides of the controversy. Thio Su Mien, mentor to the AWARE new guard, is former dean of the Faculty of Law at the National University of Singapore; as noted above, Josie Lau is a vice president at DBS Bank. Among the AWARE old guard, Braema Mathi is a former nominated member of Parliament (NMP) and a former Straits Times journalist. Both Straits Times reporter Li Xueying and NMP Siew Kum Hong told PolOffs separately that the political influence of evangelical Christianity in Singapore, at least among the affluent ethnic Chinese community, is greater than is generally acknowledged. To the extent that high-ranking political figures were divided over the AWARE affair, the government may not have been able to formulate its position as rapidly as one might have expected.

In this respect, it may be noteworthy that DPM Wong's May 14 statement also exhorted Singapore journalists to cover such events more dispassionately and avoid the kind of "breathless" coverage given to the AWARE dispute.

#### Government Reaffirms Stance Against Promoting Homosexuality

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¶8. (U) The AWARE controversy is not the first time homosexuality has emerged as the flash point for a culture war simmering beneath Singapore's bland surface. In 2007, vigorous debate ensued when NMP Siew Kum Hong petitioned for the repeal of Penal Code Section 377A, which criminalizes sex between men (see reftel). Siew Kum Hong reappeared in the AWARE controversy as legal counsel for the old guard during their May 2 victory. In 2007, NMP Thio Li-Ann famously compared homosexual anal sex to "shoving a straw up your nose to drink," to thunderous applause in Parliament. Thio Li-Ann is Thio Su Mien's daughter. The 2007 debate ended with Section 377A intact, and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong offered the government's final word: Singapore would not proactively enforce the statute, leaving homosexuals to live their private lives in peace as long as they did not actively promote their sexual orientation. On May 14, shortly after

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the MOE announced suspension of AWARE's sex education program, DPM Wong affirmed that the government's policy has not changed and urged homosexuals to "accept the informal limits" Singapore places on them. Meanwhile, Siew Kum Hong, who has applied for a second term as an NMP, has become the target of an on-line campaign to derail his candidacy by branding him a fifth columnist for an alleged homosexual lobby.

#### Singapore Civil Society: Weak and Undemocratic

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¶9. (SBU) Comment: AWARE's experience shows that in Singapore, even a 24-year-old civil society organization lacks institutional strength and maturity. The group's bylaws permitted new members to vote on and stand for leadership positions immediately, but the old leaders were taken by surprise when new members voted them out. Though both sides acknowledged that the election followed the rules, the old guard seized back "their" organization without waiting to see how the new exco would govern. For its part, the short-lived new exco alienated long-standing AWARE members by appearing secretive and high-handed. Each side accused the other of bad faith and hidden agendas, and both factions recruited members just to amass more votes for the May 2 showdown. Only a decisive outcome and the inevitable government pronouncements finally started to quell the acrimonious attacks over religion and homosexuality. In the end, Singapore civil society failed to meet the challenge posed by a few religious-conservative Singaporeans trying to

make their voices heard in the civic arena. End Comment.

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